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THEATRE CRITICS'

Reviews

1943

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*Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of October 11, 1943.

†*"One Touch of Venus" opened Thursday, October 7th, at the Imperial Theatre.*

THEATRE CRITICS' REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

Theater Critics' Reviews brings you the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York papers

NEW YORK SUN
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NEW YORK TIMES
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"One Touch of Venus"

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER PM
October 8, 1943

Venus and B'way Come to Life

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

WITH *One Touch of Venus* Broadway, which has been lurching, stumbling and even walking crab-fashion for two months, has begun to hit its stride. Whatever is wrong with it—and we shall come to that presently—*One Touch of Venus* is an unhackneyed and imaginative musical that spurns the easy formulas of Broadway, that has personality and wit and genuinely high moments of music and dancing. And among other things, it brings Kenny Baker to a Broadway that badly needs another good juvenile, and brings Mary Martin back to Broadway to prove that she is anything but a one-song girl. She is, indeed, a fetching and accomplished actress who keeps going through an entire evening.

Venus, like *Oklahoma!*, breaks with musical-comedy tradition. But where *Oklahoma!* has the smell of new-mown hay, *Venus* is like a trick perfume. I suppose the simplest way out is to call it sophisticated. S. J. Perelman and Ogden Nash have dandified the fanciful plot with their cleverness and wit, and Mr. Nash has worked up some smart and ingenious lyrics. Kurt Weill has composed all kinds of songs with all kinds of orchestrations and Agnes De Mille has had even bolder ideas about dancing than she had for *Oklahoma!* Nobody concerned has been the least bit inhibited. Unfortunately nobody has been completely successful.

Mr. Weill, I think, comes off best. His is a good evening's worth of music, and on three occasions it is delightful. *I Am a Stranger Here Myself*, which Miss Martin puts over superbly, is the high point of the show and one of the best musical-comedy songs in years. *Speak Low*, if less memorable, is also very taking, and *The Trouble With Women* is a grand barber-shop quartet.

Some of the dancing that Miss De Mille has contrived is remarkably fresh and original. The trouble as a whole, however, is that it lacks lightness and seems to lack variety.

As for the book, its cleverness is often too strained, or at least too literary. There is real wit in it, but much that would rate an appreciative smile if it were read goes to pieces on the stage, trying to fetch a laugh. Furthermore, this tale of a statue of Venus that comes to life lends itself to *most* of a carnal nature that have something of a smirk about them. But if Messrs. Perelman and Nash have had fairly tough going, at their best they have delivered themselves of subtler wit than has probably ever graced a musical comedy before.

Miss Martin is worthy of her star part. She can do more than sing, she has an air about her, she is good to look at—in fact terrific to look at in a Mainbocher black dress. John Boles does what he can with a rather unrewarding role. Teddy Hart is once again an amusing little man with a modified shriek for a voice. Paula Laurence is funny where she can be, which isn't too often. But Sono Osato's dancing is one of the big things in the show—I wish there were space to say more.

Even though much of *Venus* doesn't come off, I found it an unusual and very pleasant evening.

NEW YORK TIMES
October 8, 1943

'One Touch of Venus,' Which Makes the Whole World Kin, Opens At the Imperial

BY LEWIS NICHOLS

AS ITS friends were about to give it up as a wayward child, the theatre season finally reached Broadway last evening. Call this millenium "One Touch of Venus," the musical show by Kurt Weill, S. J. Perelman and Ogden Nash, which Cheryl Crawford presented at the Imperial, complete with freshness, an adult manner and lavishness of display. Once again, after what seem like long and dreary years, going to the theatre has become a pleasure.

In offering an harassed New York its first fully professional musical show in some time, Miss Crawford has gone to the best sources. Mr. Perleman and Mr. Nash are in there with a book which, while not perfect throughout, is better than those of most musicals, and Mr. Nash by himself has turned out lyrics both soft and sweet—and sometimes, perhaps, just a shade confused. Mr. Weill has offered a number of songs which are due for the juke boxes and other fame, and Agnes de Mille, who stages the dances these days, has arrived with fine choreography and Sono Osato as premiere danseuse.

* * *

In addition to all this, there is Mary Martin, too, the Mary Martin whose heart once belonged to daddy and who shows in "One Touch of Venus" that Hollywood has done her no harm whatsoever. In this new musical she is a statue that comes to life and falls in love with a barber; she also is a lady of high charm, an engaging quality and the ability to toss a song over the footlights, which is the only place to send a song. Her heart this morning will probably be Broadway's generally.

The two other chief players are making their first appearance on the stage, and they are good ones. The pictures yielded up John Boles, to be the proprietor of Miss Crawford's art gallery; and the radio and pictures offered Kenny Baker. Both of them are excellent, the latter giving a performance filled with good nature as the barbar who suddenly finds Venus, like one of the wives of "Blithe Spirit", alive and pursuing him. Paula Laurence is present for wry wit and a couple of sinister songs, and Teddy Hart is the chief comedian.

Since music and girls are the soul of musical comedy, "One Touch of Venus" has thought of them also. There is no Rockette chorus kicking from left to right; rather Miss de Mille has gone to work with her sense of humor so that the dancing all seems new and cheerful. Miss Osato likely is to be the toast of the autumn, for she is graceful and alive as well as being beautiful and as giving the impression that she, herself, is having a wonderful time. She and various partners are in three numbers, including an excellent "Venus in Ozone Heights Ballet," and they seemed little enough at the time.

To turn to Mr. Weill: His "Speak Low," sung as a duet by Miss Martin and Mr. Baker, is a sure hit unless the musical world has gone mad; and "West Wind," "That's Him" and "Wooden Wedding" are also good songs in a list of about fifteen. A barber-shop quartet chants out a fine and cynical tribute under the name of "The Trouble With Women," and Mr. Boles sings the sad story of "Dr. Crippen" in a mood and a tune not unlike that of Mr. Weill's celebrated "Saga of Jenny." The composer himself orchestrated for softness and the voices can be heard above the trumpets.

As for the rest, Elia Kazan directed for pace, and while the early part of the show is not so fast as the last, the fault there likely lay in a slow-starting book. Howard Bay designed the simple and colorful settings and Paul Du Pont and Kermit Love the gay costumes. Taken altogether, "One Touch of Venus" provides one of the better evenings in the theatre.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
October 8, 1943

Mary Martin, John Boles, Kenny Baker Head Cast of New Comedy

By ROBERT GARLAND

THE goings-on were good and gala last night at the Imperial where Cheryl Crawford, in association with John Wildberg, presented "One Touch of Venus" before a highly appreciative congregation. There were crowds on the sidewalk outside the theatre, just as if West 45th Street were Hollywood. Inside, there were cheers and bravos. For all I know to the contrary, the audience may still be there applauding, just as they were when I departed to put the good news in the paper.

Top-notchers have certainly been assembled to make "One Touch of Venus" the smash hit it is sure to be. Kurt Weill has composed his finest score since "The Three Penny Opera" first brought his tuneful talents to New York's attention. S. J. Perelman has done the book with the help of Ogden Nash, who attended to the lyrics. As if all this were not enough, there are dances by Agnes de Mille, staging by Elia Kazan and orchestral direction by Maurice Abravanel.

And, as the star, there is Mary Martin, whose heart now belongs to Broadway rather than to daddy. It is one of a reviewer's keener pleasures to be able to tell the world that Miss Martin has grown into a performer of the first magnitude; that not only is she lovely, but that she can dance, sing and project a serious scene—the finale of the piece is really touching—with the best of them. The producers have given Miss Martin her big opportunity. She makes the most of it!

* * *

There is a Gilbert and Sullivan flavor to the libretto and the lyrics S. J. Perelman and Ogden Nash have worked out between them. It is a Gilbert and Sullivan flavor peppered by some cockeyed jingles that even the great W. S. himself wouldn't have dared ask Sir Arthur to set to music. That one about the memoirs, for instance: "Oh, boy, what memoirs them was!" As a matter of compliment, there's an endearingly cockeyed quality about a good part of the Imperial's proceedings.

There is, too, a story, the one about the statue that comes to life and has herself a time among the fleshpots of this wicked but oftimes wonderful world. Brought to life in the Museum of Modern Art, the Venus who is Mary Martin—and no apologies are necessary—wanders from there to Radio City, from a mid-town bus terminal to a definitely S. J. Perelman barber shop, from a deliciously feminine hotel-room to a large and commodious cell in the bad old tombs.

And back to the Museum again. She sings "I'm a Stranger Here Myself," which is amusing. She sings "Speak Low," which is sentimental. And she sings "That's Him," which is altogether charming. There is no better bit of sheer artistry on Broadway than the manner in which Miss Martin, seated alone on the stage, put that number over. It is an outstanding interlude in a musical comedy replete with them.

Mary Martin's surroundings — including a perfectly proportioned cast—could scarcely be improved upon. Both Kenny Baker and John Boles play and sing delightfully into her hands. Mr. Baker as the hero whom I suspect of being an extremely poor barber when he isn't running away from Miss Martin's Venus in the first act and making love to her in the second; Mr. Boles as a fabulous multi-millionaire who supports the Museum of Modern Art.

Paula Laurence, out of the night clubs and "Something For the Boys," is a joy throughout the evening. Wait until you hear her sing that "Very, Very Very." And, speaking of the songs which follow each other in tuneful and varied profusion, wait also until you hear what the barber-shop quartet does with a little number called "The Trouble With Women" which has some lyrics the authorities wouldn't let them use in Boston. There is also "Way Out West in Jersey" to look forward to.

But I can't begin to enumerate "One Touch of Venus'" innumerable attractions. Kurt Weill's score is really an achievement, along with his orchestrations. Agnes de Mille's imaginative dances, the solo work of Sono Osato, Howard Bay's effective backgrounds and Miss Martin's gowns by Mainbocher . . . In other and fewer words, there's a new smash hit in town. It's name is "One Touch of Venus." For many a month to come you'll find it at the Imperial!

"One Touch of Venus"

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
October 8, 1943

'One Touch of Venus' Brings A Touch of Life to Broadway

By JOHN CHAPMAN

VENUS comes to life in the delightful show which opened last night at the Imperial Theatre—and so does the musical comedy stage. After a long time of waiting there is something to talk about, and its title is "One Touch of Venus."

In the last week or so I have heard more than one canny entrepreneur of show business sigh and say, "I wish I could bring something in now. After what has happened so far this season anything half-way good will look wonderful." It may be that Cheryl Crawford's new musical is merely a blessed relief—but I think it is better than that.

It isn't perfect. It needs pace here and there, it could use some simple humor and a dream ballet is two minutes or so too long and becomes a bore; but these debits can be overlooked when the credits are being valued.

Miss Martin's a Dream

Chief credit is Mary Martin, whose one other appearance on Broadway fixed her in mind as a pert and saucy lass who did a cute strip tease and sang "My Heart Belongs to Daddy." Miss Martin now emerges—from Hollywood, of all places—as a young woman of wit, grace and endearing charm who can sing you a love song from a straight-backed chair and wear clothes like nobody's business. The lady has style in whatever she does.

Mary is a statue of Venus which John Boles has bought. Mr. Boles —Hollywood's old John Boles and as good as new—is a wealthy and mildly eccentric art lover like the man in Philadelphia; he looks something like Frank Buck, but he doesn't bring the statue back alive. It takes an ordinary young barber—radio's Kenny Baker—to swing this trick by placing a ring on the statue's finger. Miss Martin comes alive and it turns out that she's 3,000 years old, like the late Deathless Deer, but she doesn't look a day over 20.

A Sure Song Hit

That is enough plot for the time being. The rest of it is boy-girl stuff and maybe we won't have to take it up again, for there are more immediate facts to consider. The music, for instance, by Kurt Weill. It is hard to put a finger on Mr. Weill's work, for it is not Tin Pan Alley. It is elusive and tricky without being smarty; never is it lush and fruity. It teases you along, and I like a lot of it very much.

One song is a sure hit—"Speak Low." Mr. Weill and lyrist Ogden Nash have got together here on a song for Miss Martin and Mr. Baker which will have swoon crooners fainting all over the broadcast band. Another number for Miss Martin, "That's Him," has special charm in the show but it might not survive lifting out of its place.

Another immediate fact of "One Touch of Venus" is the physical production. Howard Bay's settings are quietly lavish and cannily contrived; Paul Dupont and Kermit Love have fashioned pleasant costumes, and Mainbocher has shot the works with needle, thread and fabric to clothe a Venus the way she ought to be clad if she's going to go gadding about New York.

Sono Osato's Ballet

A third item of great credit is the dancing, contrived by Agnes De Mille and executed in the main by an impish, imaginative and beautifully schooled lass named Sono Osato. She is aided at times by Peter Birch and by Lou Wills Jr., who is an excellent hoofer; and there is, of course, a group of ballet girls and boys. The first-act ballet, "Forty Minutes for Lunch," is a pip, being funny and inventive. The second-act number, in which Mary Martin gets turned back to stone, can't carry its own weight and should be cut to a better size.

Authors of the book are Mr. Nash and S. J. Perelman. There is an occasional flash of the Perelman goofiness, but not enough. The Nash lyrics are smartly turned, and I noticed the champion lyric-turning expert, Cole Porter, cocking an attentive ear from the second or third row.

There's only a moment left for odds and ends, but I should mention the occasional appearance of Teddy Hart, the presence of Paula Laurence and her determinedly brittle comedy, and a hilarious barber-shop quartet, "The Trouble With Women," sung by Boles, Baker, Hart and Harry Clark.

'ONE TOUCH OF VENUS'

Musical play with music by Kurt Weill, book by S. J. Perelman and Ogden Nash, lyrics by Ogden Nash, staging by Elia Kazan, dances by Agnes de Mille, settings by Howard Bay; presented by Cheryl Crawford at the Imperial Theater, Thursday evening, October 7, 1943. The cast:

Whitelaw Savory	John Boles
Molly Grant	Paula Laurence
Taxi Black	Teddy Hart
Stanley	Harry Clark
Rodney Hatch	Kenny Baker
Venus	Mary Martin
Mrs. Moats	Florence Dunlap
Store manager	Sam Bonnell
Bus starter	Lou Wills, Jr.
Sam	Zachary A. Charles
Mrs. Kramer	Helen Raymond
Gloria Kramer	Ruth Bond
Police lieutenant	Bert Freed
Rose	Jane Hoffman
Zuvelti	Harold Stone
Dr. Rook	Johnny Stearns
Anatolians	Sam Bonnell, Matthew Farrar
Premiere danseuse	Sono Osato

NEW YORK POST
October 8, 1943

"One Touch of Venus" Opens at the Imperial

By WILELLA WALDORF

AFTER the inept and amateurish concoctions to which we have been exposed in the past few weeks, it is a pleasure to attend a new musical comedy that is adult, professional, often comic and genuinely musical.

"One Touch of Venus" has so many delightful features that it is easy to overlook its faults and concentrate on the fact that it provides an uncommonly rewarding evening in the theatre. If the first act seemed a bit too long and the book and lyrics strained too hard at times for that ultra-sophisticated touch, it is, after all, the story of a statue of the goddess Venus brought to life in 1943, and it is not designed for children or for prudes. Some of it is rather obvious and now and then it is merely blatant, but for the most part it is cleverly contrived and produced with good taste.

Music and Dancing

The most impressive items in an elaborate and apparently very expensive production are Kurt Weill's score and the ballets devised by Agnes de Mille.

Mr. Weill has made his own arrangements and orchestrations, and the producer, Cheryl Crawford, has engaged a larger-than-usual orchestra ably conducted by Maurice Abravanel, who is used to even bigger orchestras. Although some of the melodies reminded us now and then of other tunes, this is the best score by Mr. Weill that we recall.

Since "The Three-Penny Opera," he has disappointed us. "Lady in the Dark," hit though it was, bored us very thoroughly. It is a long time since we have heard a new and modern score in musical comedy that struck us as something at once popular and unusually fine. Even the milder song numbers in "One Touch of Venus" are orchestrated so beautifully that they make excellent listening.

Agnes de Mille, since her success with the ballets in "Oklahoma!" is now the most sought-after choreographer on Broadway. If she goes on staging dances hereabout, people may grow a little tired of her style, which is very distinctive. But right now she is at her peak, and her shorter first-act ballets in "One Touch of Venus," as danced by Sono Osato with Robert Pageant as her partner, are top-grade de Mille, reflecting her highly developed and individual comedy sense.

We preferred her "Forty Minutes for Lunch" and "Foolish Heart" ballets to the longer, more elaborate number, "Venus in Ozone Heights" which closed the play. Although highly touted en route, and giving the dancers more scope for leaping and twirling, it struck us as the sort of "pagan rout" occasionally indulged in by the Ballet Russe in one of its more routine moods.

Venus Chases a Barber

The Messrs. Perelman and Nash have concocted a book about Venus coming to life and chasing a handsome young barber, while she in turn is chased by a wealthy middle-aged art fancier. The plot is simple and does not get in the way of the music and dancing, which is nice of it, and now and then there are some snappy lines. Mr. Nash's lyrics, though sounding at their worst like a rather tired Cole Porter, are often very diverting and even witty.

Furthermore, most of the lyrics could be heard, and while the singing of the company did not match the playing of the orchestra (it seldom does these days), the major principals at least were never blatant, a virtue unfortunately lacking in one or two of the minor performers.

Mary Martin, whose Broadway celebrity rests chiefly upon the fact that she once "sang" something called "My Heart Belongs to Daddy," has developed nicely in Hollywood, and her performance as Venus is graceful, amusing and well spoken. Her knack for getting off some of the best of the Perelman-Nash lines is very helpful, and she is superlatively well dressed in Mainbocher's creations.

Miss Martin is still no singer, but she talks her songs cleverly and when she does use her few vocal tones—she has a meagre range—they are pleasant to hear and she does not force. The only one of her songs that distressed us was "Foolish Heart." A lovely melody, it needs a more accomplished singer.

Vocally the most effective player was Kenny Baker, who has a pleasant light tenor, and since he is able to act easily as well, his performance as the pursued barber becomes at once attractive and amusing. John Boles lifted up his baritone now and then and acted the amiable stuffed shirt of an art dealer stuffed-shirtily.

Paula Laurence is not on stage nearly enough to suit us, but when she is on, she makes everything she has to say sound about twice as funny as it actually is. Her two song numbers, too, are highlights, notably the second act "Very, Very, Very."

The biggest hit of the whole evening, however, except for Miss Osato's early dance number, which stopped the show, was the barber-shop quartet, "The Trouble With Women," sung by Mr. Baker, Mr. Boles, Teddy Hart and Harry Clark.

It's nice to know that Broadway has been given back to the professionals.